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Ombudsmen and Audit Offices: Does control really help our governments?



BY WOUTER VAN ACKER. Our governments are checked and controlled by several institutions. By Ombudsmen and Supreme Audit Offices, for example. But does their feedback really help? Do they really improve the government?

Written by [Wouter Van Acker](#), PhD Researcher focusing on innovation in the public sector at the Public Governance Institute.

As a student, you want feedback on the progress of your work. But if a professor writes incomprehensible gibberish, or simply writes 'needs better argumentation', you can hardly call it feedback. We're always taught to be constructive in our feedback. But when is feedback truly constructive? Is the feedback our government gives constructive, and thus effective?



Wouter Van Acker

Ombudsmen and Supreme Audit Offices give feedback to public sector organizations on a daily basis. The Ombudsman reports the misbehavior of governments, sticks up for citizens' rights and puts forth recommendations on how this can be prevented in the future. Audit Offices control the government. On whether the money is spent correctly and efficiently. Again, like the Ombudsmen, they also provide the government with recommendations on how to improve. In fact, their reports are as much about checking the government's expenditures (Audit Offices) and treatment of citizens (Ombudsmen), as they are about improving public services. But, is their feedback constructive? Can they have a real impact on public services? Or do they just write down 'needs better policy'?

What does the feedback look like?

My colleagues and I conducted over 70 interviews with Ombudsmen and Audit Offices throughout Europe. Amongst those were the Flemish and Federal Ombudsman, as well as the 'Rekenhof', the

federal Supreme Audit Office of Belgium. We found some similar problems that occur almost everywhere (Belgium included), almost all the time; both at the start and at the end of the process.

At the start of an investigation or audit, an Ombuds- or Audit team usually has an introduction meeting where the goal and process of the next weeks or months are explained. However, when we asked the organizations under scrutiny if it was clear which criteria were used to check their conduct, they usually had no idea. It seems straightforward however, as part of the introduction, that the Audit Office or Ombudsman would explain what their criteria are. How else is an organizations supposed to understand why exactly it is being criticized? Why is X seen as wrong, and how is Y a solution to it? In short: what are the standards to which the organizations are being held?

At the end of an investigation or audit, practices concerning whether the Ombuds- or Audit team returns to the organization under scrutiny to further explain their findings and recommendations differ strongly between countries. In the Netherlands for example, an evaluation meeting with 'the other side' is standard, but there is not further discussion of the report. In other countries these practices are even less developed. A report is written, send, but never discussed. Belgium was no exception in this case. Criteria were never discussed, and follow-up discussion varied widely between and within Audits and Ombudsman investigations.

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However, a large number of our respondents on that same 'other side' noted a demand for further explanation. The report is one thing, but it only becomes high quality feedback when it is completely understood and sufficiently explained. Obviously, recommendations that are policy oriented, or have a political consequence, are up to the political superior. But management, performance or procedural recommendations are made or broken at the level of the public servants. They need to be convinced by as clear and persuasive information as possible.

What is the problem with this feedback?

To be clear, these conversations between Ombuds teams, Audit teams and the representatives of the organization under scrutiny, are not negotiations. They solely serve the purpose of clarification and persuasion. Too much well-intended, greatly informed advice now goes to waste, simply because the receiving end does not properly understand what is being said and implied. And that is not their fault. The reports by themselves are simply not enough. What are the recommendations based on? What are the implications of the findings? And finally, what should implementation look like, and what are the expected results? These conversations are a great possibility for further questions, further clarification, more nuances, and more context. Especially when the focus lies purely on the non-political recommendations.

In conclusion; what do we need? Firstly, clear and transparent criteria which are used by the Ombuds- or Audit organization, so the recommendations make sense. Connected to this: greater attention to the communication and the explanation of these criteria to the organization under scrutiny. And secondly, a better dialogue afterwards; explaining, clarifying and persuading.

Then, maybe, our governments can learn and improve, to the benefit of us all.

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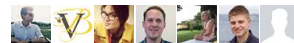
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